

TAMING THE RESEARCH PAPER

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OVERVIEW

This collaboration between a faculty member (Sushmita Chatterji) and a librarian (Robert Matthews) grew out of a need to connect the two existing pieces of the research puzzle: the process of writing a research paper and the skills acquired by students from the 50-minute library instruction.

The process of collaboration, which started in 2004, has gone through many cycles. At each stage of development, we assessed the delivery of the research writing process and the library instruction, along with student learning of library research skills. Over time, we also refined the research tools and guided assignments to enhance the students' application of the research process.

Five years later, this collaborative process between a faculty member and librarian now successfully involves the student. With this systematic approach, the student is engaged in active learning throughout the steps from narrowing a topic, formulating a challenging research question, applying the research tools in finding sources, to writing a coherent research paper. The process has transformed from two distinct pieces to one that falls on a continuum. This streamlined approach has allowed for open communication among students, faculty member, and librarian while solving the mystery behind the research process.

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A QUERY

At the beginning of our LOEX presentation, we asked participants to very quickly write a couple of words in response to "collaboration." This exercise was a free-association activity intended to generate participants' thoughts about the topic. The exercise generated the following list: converse, brainstorm, sharing, letting go of control, teacher/student /librarians all sharing information, wikis, interaction, active learning, academic support, lib guides, with other groups (faculty, IT, Other Student Service Units), working together, sharing fun (or not 😊).

THE COLLABORATIVE Δ: WHERE WE ARE NOW

The Research Paper: Composition Instructor's Perspective

I introduce the research-paper writing process to my 24 English Composition I students in eight steps. These steps serve as model for students to follow when writing their own papers. This paper, however, covers only the first four of the eight steps of the process: generating a research topic, narrowing the topic, formulating a research question to guide investigation on the narrowed topic, and finding sources using library research skills to answer the research question. All four steps are usually completed in approximately two weeks with a gap of one week between the library instructions.

During the first class on the research paper, I demonstrate one of the strategies students can use to find a topic. Using a PowerPoint presentation, I project four images, which pertain to the broad topic of homelessness. I ask students to brainstorm and pose questions in response to these images. My students and I agree that homelessness is a broad topic and must be narrowed. At this time, I present a collage of

new images, which represent a subgroup of the homeless population. The students narrow the topic to teenagers and homelessness. Then, I instruct students on the creation and characteristics of an effective research question. An effective research question is based on a narrowed topic, is grounded in research, and is challenging. At this time, students have an opportunity to evaluate and create such questions using some practice exercises. The students then apply these skills to the narrowed topic of teenagers and homelessness in formulating the model research question for the class: What are the effects of homelessness on teenagers?

In preparation for the final step of the four-step process, library instruction on developing research strategies, I have the students brainstorm responses to the model research question and take a pre-test on library skills, which is administered online using BlackBoard. The pre-test includes ten multiple-choice questions to determine what skill level students have prior to the library instructional intervention.

The Search Statement: Librarian's Perspective

The library instruction sessions consist of two class periods finalizing the fourth step of the research-paper writing process. The sessions take place in a presentation room with a computer and a projector. The first 50-minute subject based session is entirely focused on teaching students how to develop a search statement that will yield results to fulfill the requirements of the research paper. Developing a search statement can be a difficult and even overwhelming experience for first-year college students. For the first part of the first session, having been briefed on the entirety of Sushmita's research paper assignment process, I begin by using a prepared handout. The "Key Search Term" handout states the research topic, its narrowed question, eight key words about the effects of homelessness on teenagers, and the source requirements for the research paper. See Appendix A. I deliberately use this as a tool to establish my relevance and connection to the assignment. This handout also serves as a bridge to begin a search statement. Derived from the research question are the terms that become the base of the search statement (homeless and teenager). The keyword exercise and the handout of keywords that I distributed about the effects of homelessness become the three sections of the paper: A) drug abuse, B) poverty, and C) HIV/AIDS. A completed bubble worksheet is used to demonstrate the three search strategies. See Appendix for example.

As part of using key words in developing a search statement, I instruct students on the use of Boolean operators (and, or), parentheses, and wild cards. When I demonstrate the search in a research database, I show students how to retrieve full-text, scholarly journals.

The second part of the presentation has an active learning component. Students work on a "Key Search Terms" handout that indicates a research paper topic and a research question but no keywords. Working in small groups, the students brainstorm keywords and complete the forming of a search strategy bubble sheet. When students have completed the worksheets, group-by-group, they put their search strategies

into research databases that meet the source requirements for the paper. Each group receives feedback from Sushmita, members of the class, and myself for all search attempts. During both instructional parts, I try to ensure that all questions on the pre/post tests are answered. I give students blank copies of both worksheets for their own research projects.

About a week after this session, I return to the class which meets in a computer lab. Sushmita's students have had an opportunity to work on refining their research topics to a research question and have completed the worksheet that contains their search strategies. In this session, I have the opportunity to work individually with students on their research projects. If students are having difficulty with their topics, they have a chance to consult with Sushmita. If they are struggling with search terms or search strategies, they speak to me. This is an active class and follows a team-teaching approach with no formal instruction; instead, students apply the research skills learned thus far and complete searches for the required sources. This second session with a librarian is an important addition to the class. Based on observations and student feedback, this second meeting and the team-approach bridges the student gap among a librarian, the classroom instructor, the student, and the research process. Students are able to see and experience a close partnership during this 50-minute class.

After the second 50-minute library instruction session, students take the post-test. The post-test contains the exact questions as the pre-test. The post-test is used to determine the success of the library instruction. Students also complete their individual research proposals following the class model.

INTERSECTIONS: HOW WE BEGAN

When evaluating this process, we were able to identify four distinct steps leading to collaboration.

Step 1: A Disconnect

Composition Instructor's Perspective:

Since no collaboration occurred between the librarian and me prior to the class visit, the requirements of the research paper assignment did not match the information presented in the instruction. The library instruction was generic while students in the Composition class were expected to do something specific. This period of disconnect persisted during the first two years and both my students and I were left feeling frustrated and confused after the library skills instructions sessions.

Librarian's Perspective:

As a new librarian at Hudson Valley Community College and a new instructional librarian, I adopted the prevailing style of teaching that was used by my colleagues and that was passed down to them by generations of instructional librarians. The style was from the "show and tell" menu. In most cases, the librarian distributed a library assignment and showed students how to complete the assignment (how to find a book, how to find an article, how to find a newspaper article).

Even in those instances when librarians did not “teach to the assignment,” they taught the same material. In many instances, this led directly to bored or sleeping students. This type of presentation was a dissatisfying experience for everyone.

Step 2: Testing the Waters

Composition Instructor’s Perspective:

After a period of disconnect, I realized that the library instruction component of the Composition class had to change to match the research assignment. Thus, as librarians visited my class, I paid attention to their instructional styles and to their interaction with my students; I planned to approach the librarian whose style was similar to my teaching style, and I would ask that librarian if he or she would be willing to collaborate with me on the class assignment. Although I approached this year-long process of evaluating librarians with much hesitation, I saw potential in the integration of the research assignment with library skills and the positive impact this integration could have on the learning of my students given the right match.

Librarian’s Perspective:

A library instruction session lasting only 50 minutes is a difficult horse to bridle. Students are unhappy, unchallenged, and uninterested. Instructors are dissatisfied and confused as to how to handle the situation. During this period, I employed some basic and preliminary active learning methods to improve the library presentation. The first method was to involve students in the instruction by having them do all the keyboarding. This was quickly followed by asking students what their research topics were and using them as demonstrations. Although there was some success, it was limited.

Step 3: Meeting of the Minds

Composition Instructor’s Perspective:

My year-long quest for a librarian led me to Bob Matthews. I identified Bob as the librarian who would be the right match for my classes. We discussed in-depth my learning objectives for the students, which gave focus and clarity to the assignment and to the library instruction.

Librarian’s Perspective:

The instruction of library skills using active learning techniques is an important part of the connection for our collaboration. Having attended a day-long workshop on how to integrate active learning using bubble sheets had a tremendous effect on library instruction sessions. I approached Sushmita and asked her if she wanted to try a different method of instruction. She was agreeable, and we started. I felt it was important to find a faculty member who had a commitment to library instruction and who shared a similar philosophy in teaching and learning. During this period, we tried many different worksheets; they changed every semester. Endurance and a willingness to adapt are important qualities when being involved in a collaborative relationship.

Step 4: Collaboration Δ

Composition Instructor’s Perspective:

This final step, which has been in existence for the last three years, has promoted a partnership among my students, Bob, and me. Students are able to finally integrate the research paper topic and question with finding sources. As a result, the process is less frustrating, and not as overwhelming; students feel confident about the research process. Personally, I find that the collaboration results in a continuous process with minimal backtracking or re-teaching missed elements. Finally, my students, the librarian, and I speak a common language; we share a common assignment. From this experience, I recognize that if students are to make real connections between the classroom assignment of writing a research paper and finding sources in the library, I, as the instructor, have to be patient during the process and devote much time -- years, in this case -- to the process. Patience and time are necessary ingredients for collaboration and for the development of a successful final product and student.

Librarian’s Perspective:

Throughout the development of library worksheets that reflected Sushmita’s goals for her students, our commitment to the process was vital to its success. Sushmita and I had an unspoken resolve to work on this project until it was right for both of us. We also realized that we needed to be extremely flexible. We realized we were getting closer to having the right handouts in the right order by the way students were learning and by the focus and quality of their research statements.

QUERY RE-VISITED

At the conclusion of our LOEX presentation, we again asked the participants to write their responses to collaboration. The new words were as follows: convincing faculty, number of classes vs. number of librarians, challenging, willingness to take risks, systematic, willingness for faculty to share, auditioning, librarian/partners, match in instruction styles, students, patience, shared philosophy, assignment development, working sessions.

An analysis of this exercise suggests that the first set of words generated is broad and superficial, and the ideas are not connected. The second set, on the other hand, is focused and more in-depth and describes characteristics needed for collaboration. The second set of words demonstrates understanding of collaboration among instructor, librarian, and students.

BENEFITS Δ

The collaboration process, symbolized by the use of the triangle, illustrates the many benefits to the instructor, the librarian, and the students. The data from the pre/post test results, which has been collected for five successive semesters since fall 2006, indicates an overall grade increase of 56.1% for English Composition I sections. Since the integrated approach to library instruction has been effective, this approach now extends to the

online version of the Composition course. This is achieved by the use of web-based tutorials posted on the library's web site and in-class handouts.

HOW TO START YOUR OWN Δ

Although the collaborative activities shared here focus specifically on the English Composition course and the library, the same strategies to foster student learning can be achieved through other activities in different academic areas. Students can develop an annotated bibliography, organize an oral presentation, create a PowerPoint presentation, formulate a business plan, design a building or machine, or evaluate a building's form.

We would like to thank our colleague, James LaBate, for the work he put into editing this document.

APPENDIX A

Key Search Terms

English Composition I

Informative Research Paper Assignment

Name: _____

Research Paper Topic: homeless

Research Question: What are the effects of homelessness on teenagers?

drug abuse

alcoholism

poor

hungry

prostitution

HIV

addiction

AIDS

Books

- HVCC Online Catalog
- SUNY Connect
- Gale Virtual Reference Library
 - Advanced Search
 - Document Title
- Opposing Viewpoints Research Center
 - Advanced Search

2 Journal Articles

- Academic Search Premier
 - Advanced Search
 - Title
 - Full Text
 - Scholarly (Peer Reviewed) Journal
- CQ Researcher Online

Newspaper Article (1,000 words)

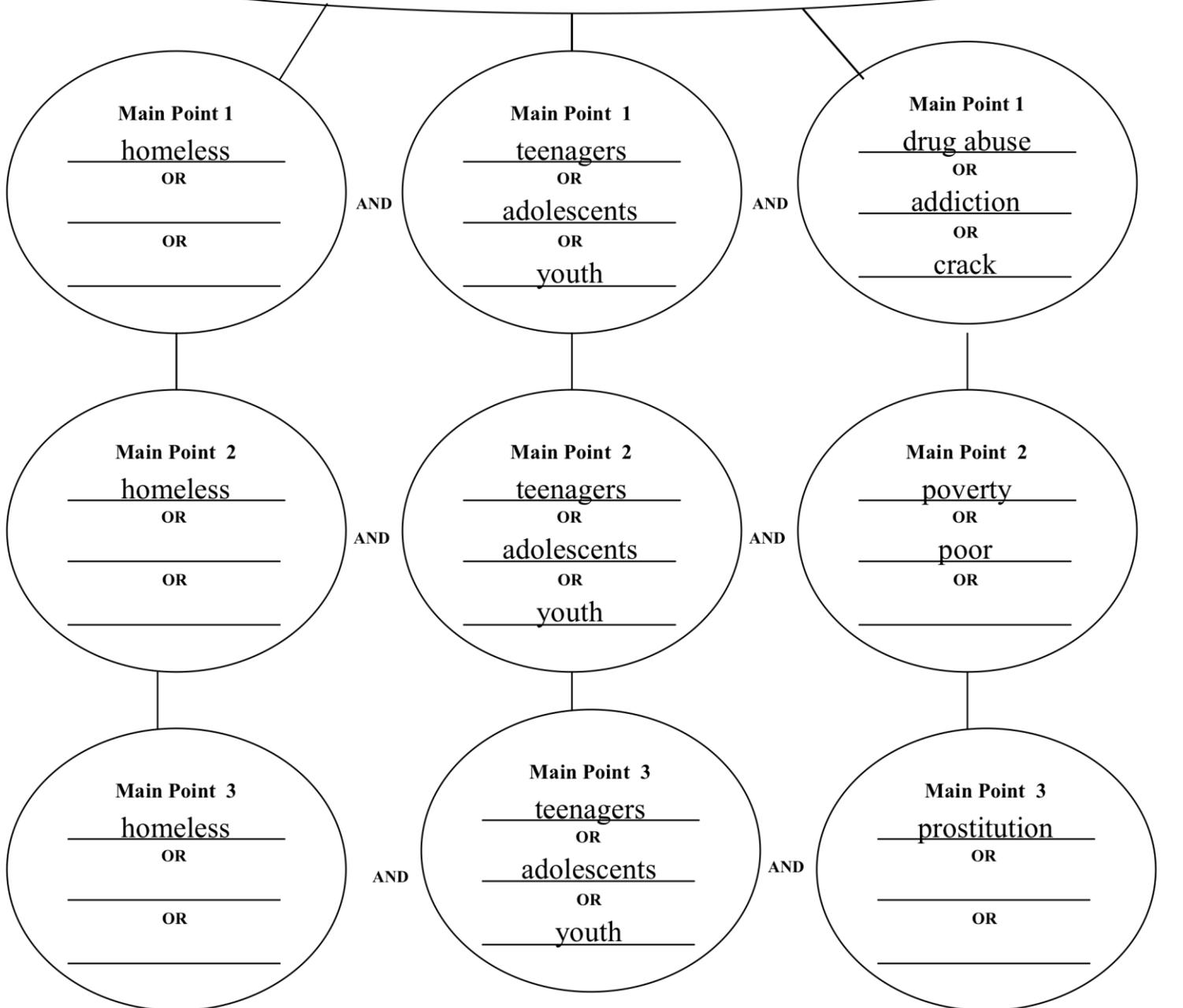
- LexisNexis
 - News
 - In Headline
 - New York Times
 - All available dates

Internet

- Use your favorite search engine (i.e. Google)

Forming a Search Strategy

Question: What are the effects of homelessness on teenagers?



Search Statements:

1. homeless* and (teen* or adolescen* or youth) and (drug* or addict* or crack)
2. homeless* and (teen* or adolescen* or youth) and (poverty or poor)
3. homeless* and (teen* or adolescen* or youth) and prostitut*